Program Evaluation: What's it all about?

The first step in designing a program evaluation process is to consider who is driving the decision to conduct an evaluation and their reasons for wanting one. Among the forces that may drive (or should drive) an evaluation and what may be motivating them, are these:

- Management, and perhaps other staff, may be concerned about quality, comfortable that a satisfactory level of quality currently exists but believe opportunities for continuous improvement are desirable. They may be interested in achieving a higher level of efficiency, or want to demonstrate the program's impact on a subset or target clientele.

- Funders such as state and federal agencies, may seek assurance that the goals of the program they're funding are being met. One or more major existing or potential funders may be questioning the continued relevancy of the program. Funders are relying increasingly on solid demonstrations of results. While the results of program evaluation efforts may not be the sole basis for a funding decision, they generally agree that evaluation is a major factor in their decisions.

- A governmental unit, which has contracted with an agency to deliver certain services, may require an evaluation because of laws, regulations, or normal practice.

- Clients may be complaining or complimentary about the quality of the services provided, and asking for changes in those services, or providing other feedback that should be heeded by program administrators

- Your competition may indirectly drive the need for an evaluation.

- Local, state, and federal public policymakers may drive demands for more accountability or suggest new strategic directions for your program. Legislatures, appointed and elected public officials and others who set policy base some decisions on evaluation results.

- Finally, "All of the Above" may be your driving force.

What Next?

The second step is to identify the expected benefits of the evaluation itself.

Obviously, satisfying the interests of whoever is driving the evaluation is one benefit, but dig deeper. How else might the results be used to further the mission of the organization? What decisions should be enhanced by the evaluation?

— shifting the perspective of program staff from providing services to producing outcomes and constantly striving to improve those outcomes;
— providing an organizational exercise that motivates staff to think deeply about the programs they manage and adapt to changing conditions;
— understanding customers and what influences them;
— helping to establish realistic expectations of outcomes;
— focusing resources on the most effective services;
— enabling the organization to tell a more credible story to funders, the board; and, other stakeholders and
— identifying opportunities for collaborations.

The last step is to establish the specific objectives of the evaluation and the criteria within which it must be conducted. Related to the evaluation objectives are the criteria or conditions under which the evaluation process must operate. An objective should state what is intended to be gained/learned from the evaluation, when the evaluation must be completed, who will undertake it, and within what budget or staff resources the evaluation must be conducted.

Don't think of the objective as a search for fault. Think of it as a search for success! Remember, research findings can sit on a shelf until someone deems them useful; evaluations, by contracts, are intended to be useful in decision making from the outset. So an evaluation that fails the test of being useful or otherwise not being utilizated in some way is an evaluation that has failed to serve its intended purpose.

Evaluation Choices

The variety of viewpoints described above and in the attachment suggests many choices among which a program administrator, evaluator, sponsor, and stakeholder must decide. The first choice being whether or not to use a quantitative (statistical or other numerical) measures or qualitative method (description of a phenomena and/or events in an attempt to explain and understand them). The second choice is whether or not the purpose of the evaluation is formative (concerned with improving an ongoing program or product) or summative (determining its worth or value at the completion of a program or program phase). In addition, is the intent to use the evaluation results to assess for results (i.e. discontinue, continue, expand, refunding the program) or to mainly inform or reform the project. The third issue is the decision to involve client participation versus nonparticipation. Lastly, should the evaluator be internal or external to the program or the institution? These questions and other related matters are critical to the design of the evaluation in advance of implementing the evaluation in terms of defining the problem to be addressed (and solved?) and the design of the evaluation process and determination of those who should participate in the process.

Evaluation Plan Design Questions

✔ **School-To-Work Indicator/Measure**

1. What <u>exactly</u> are you trying to evaluate?

   a. What is the problem?
   b. What is your proposed solution?
   c. What is the expected outcome of your solution?

2. Who are you reporting the results to and why?

   a. What type of reporting is required? When is it required?
   b. What "evidence" and/or data would be acceptable to your reviewer(s)?

✔ **Source(s) of Information**

1. Where do you need to go to get this data?
2. Who should be gathering data?
3. Are there any tools or mechanisms in place to gather data?
4. Who should create new data sources? What sources?

   a. How should it be gathered?
   b. When should it be gathered?
   c. How should it be analyzed/assessed? By whom?

✔ **Formative/On-going Elements**

1. How will you know you are making progress towards your goals?
2. What kind of data will tell you how you are doing overall?
3. What kind of data will tell you what the problems are?
4. What kind of data will tell you what has to be changed and how?

✔ **Summative/Outcome Elements**

1. When will the final/summative evaluation be conducted?
2. Who will conduct it?
3. How will you know when you should conduct a final evaluation?
4. In what format should the final evaluation report be? What should your final report look like? Why?
5. What should it look like if each goal has been achieved?

Evaluation Plan Design Questions (continued)

✔ **Data Collection Tools and Analysis Process**

1. What kind of qualitative or quantitative measures make sense given the data you need?
2. Why are you trying to evaluate this indicator/measure?

   a. How will you know if this has been achieved?
   b. What kind of "evidence" would show that you have achieved this goal?

3. What will be accepted as credible methods? By whom? Why?
4. How will you actually analyze the information? Who will design the tools or the process for analysis? Who will filter out the implications?
5. What kind of information, orientation, training do they need in order to do the analysis well?
6. What support do you need/require from others in order to implement your plan?
7. Where will you distribute the results of the analysis? Why? What will they do with it?
8. If change is necessary (formative evaluation) who is responsible for its design, implementation, and re-evaluation as a result of the change?
9. How realistic is your evaluation plan in terms of time, personnel and financial resources?

✔ **How Will the Data Be Used? By Whom?**

1. How will the results of analysis and its implications be shared? By whom? In what forum or format? When?
2. How and when will the analysis be used to shape, guide, redirect, impact upon the project, partnerships, decision-making, and future direction(s)?